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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAL](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: "WE ARE READY": IRAQI DIPLOMATS AND ELECTION  
OFFICIALS MAKE FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR ELECTIONS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 57  
[B](#). DAMASCUS 77  
[C](#). STATE 17254

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for Reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Following weeks of discussions with SARG ministries, the Iraqi Embassy and the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) reported they would be ready to facilitate voting by Iraqi refugees in Syria in the Iraqi legislative elections on March 5-7. However, confusion over some key details of the voting raised doubts about these optimistic statements. IHEC opened an office on one of Damascus' principal avenues last week, and Arab diplomats reported Iraqi election officials were working around the clock to organize polling sites and get the word out among Iraqi refugees. Iraqi diplomats said the SARG had been largely cooperative with the embassy and IHEC, despite strained relations between the two capitals. But Iraqi diplomats remained worried the SARG was attempting to influence the outcome of the voting in Syria. The Iraqi Embassy reported Vice President Tariq al-Hashmi planned to visit Damascus early next week in an attempt to drum up support among Iraqi refugees here. Iraqi refugees and NGOs working with them related that most refugees remained apathetic about the upcoming elections. While expecting low voter turnout, observers believe the large Sunni community here is likely to vote against parties supporting Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. END SUMMARY.

"WE WILL BE READY"

[1](#)2. (C) Iraqi Embassy Political Chief Berivan Dosky and Media Attache Ahmed Ubaid told us February 24 the embassy was confident voting among Iraqi refugees in Syria would go off smoothly March 5-7. The statement comes after weeks of discussions between IHEC representatives and the SARG, including the Ministry of Interior, intelligence officials, and the police. While Iraqi diplomats had expressed concern recently about the lack of progress in organizing the absentee balloting (refs A, B), Dosky stated she was now confident logistical planning was proceeding on schedule. "We will be ready. We will make sure that all Iraqis with valid identification are able to vote, and that they only vote once," Dosky declared.

[1](#)3. (C) The Iraqi diplomats reported the SARG had been largely cooperative with the embassy and IHEC officials in logistical preparation for the election, despite the frosty relations between Damascus and Baghdad. Referring to Syrian assumptions the largely Sunni Iraqi refugee population in Syria will support opponents of Prime Minister Maliki, Dosky said, "We think the Syrians are anxious to have the voting go well because they think the refugees will vote for Syria's preferred candidates."

#### IHEC OPENS DAMASCUS OFFICE

14. (C) Last week, IHEC opened its offices on the Autostrade, one of Damascus' principal avenues, in preparation for the voting. The office is headed by IHEC official Haidar Zaidi. Iraqi diplomats said IHEC and embassy officials were working "around the clock" to finalize logistical preparations and get the word out among Iraqi refugees regarding the locations of polling places. Syrian officials were assisting IHEC by providing space for the polling sites and security, but the SARG was not providing any funding for the balloting. According to media contacts, IHEC officials proposed opening some 75 voting stations around the country; after negotiations with the Syrians, the number will now be closer to 40.

#### CONFUSION REMAINS OVER SOME DETAILS

15. (C) Despite the confidence expressed by the Iraqi Embassy and IHEC, confusion remained over some key details. Ubaid reported that based on a written agreement with the SARG, 36 polling sites would be opened (32 in Damascus, and 4 in Aleppo). He said IHEC had requested polling sites in the northeastern cities of Qamishli and Hassaka, but the Syrians had refused. Instead, the SARG offered opening additional polling sites in Aleppo at which Iraqis in northeastern Syria could vote. Ubaid expressed frustration that Zaidi was telling diplomats that 55 polling sites would be opened, including in the central Syrian cities of Homs and Hama. An Egyptian diplomat reported an IHEC official said there would be 167 sites opened on election day. "We still need to work out some of these details," Dosky admitted.

16. (C) Iraqi diplomats and IHEC officials also contradicted each other regarding whether voters outside Iraq would vote for seats specifically slotted for "out-of-country Iraqis," or would be voting for candidates running in their home districts in Iraq. In mid-January, Iraqi diplomats said they understood Iraqi refugees would cast ballots for 15 seats that have been allocated to Iraqi refugees. On February 24, however, IHEC officials reported "out-of-country Iraqis" would vote for candidates from their home districts. Undermining confidence in the embassy's more optimistic statements, Dosky said the embassy had been unable to confirm the exact method of voting. "This has been confusing for us, too," she related.

17. (C) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Syria office will monitor the elections, as will two international NGOs including the U.S.-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFEC). Ubaid said IHEC is also employing the assistance of "international advisors" in Syria from Romania and Sweden. Per ref. C, Post will offer personnel to monitor election day activities.

#### WORRIED ABOUT SARG INFLUENCE

18. (C) While praising SARG cooperation with IHEC in organizing the balloting, Dosky reported the GOI remained concerned the SARG would attempt to influence the voting. Iraqi diplomats said they believed the Syrians were funneling money provided by Saudi Arabia to the campaigns of Iyad Allawi and other Maliki opponents. "The Syrians don't have money, so they are giving Saudi money to Iraqis here trying to increase voter turnout for their preferred candidates," Dosky complained. Despite these concerns, the Iraqi diplomats acknowledged that Iraqi refugees in Syria, who are largely Sunni, were expected to vote for candidates opposed to Prime Minister Maliki and who were friendlier to Syria.

#### HASHMI HEADS TO DAMASCUS AS NGOS PREDICT LOW TURNOUT

19. (C) An advance team for Vice President Tariq al-Hashmi met with Iraqi Embassy officials earlier this week to discuss Hashmi's plans to visit Damascus next week. Dosky said the embassy was preparing for a visit between March 1 and 3, and that Hashmi planned on meeting President Asad and drumming up support among Iraqi refugees. "He is coming in his capacity

as an advocate for his political party," Ubaid stressed. Hashmi's planned trip follows visits by other Iraqi politicians, including Allawi, Ammar al-Hakim, and Saleh al-Mutlaq, to Syria in the last few months.

¶10. (C) Despite the candidates' attempts to garner support in Syria, Iraqi refugees and the NGOs who work with them reported widespread apathy among Iraqis towards the elections. During a January town hall meeting, several refugees stated they had lost faith in Iraqi politicians and did not plan to participate in the elections. Samer Lahem, who coordinates Iraqi refugee assistance programs for the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate, told us February 23 the Iraqis he worked with rarely discussed the elections "because they are not taking them too seriously." Lahem predicted low voter turnout among Iraqi refugees. Representatives from other NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Medical Corps (IMC) made similar predictions, as did a visiting delegation of British officials from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

¶11. (C) While estimates of the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria vary widely, from a January GOI estimate of 200,000 to SARG statements ranging from 800,000 to 1.5 million, Dosky said the Iraqi Embassy believed there were about 400,000 Iraqis currently in Syria. "Among those, I don't expect a very large number to vote, definitely less than half," she opined. An Iraqi young man working illegally at a Damascus cafe agreed. "I'm not paying attention to this at all," he related.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Given significant logistical challenges and the lack of consensus on key details, planning for the March 5-7 voting by Iraqi refugees in Syria is proceeding as well as could be expected. It is noteworthy Iraqi diplomats praised SARG cooperation in facilitating the voting, the only praise Iraqi diplomats have directed towards Damascus in the last few months (though the Syrians may be anxious to encourage voting among the largely Sunni refugee population for their own purposes). Voter turnout, however, is another matter. Only about 30,000 Iraqi refugees voted in the last national elections in 2005, though a Sunni boycott of the voting certainly played a role. Turnout among refugees this year will say a great deal about whether Iraqi voters here

have faith in their electoral system, its ability to influence change in their homeland, and the degree to which they remain engaged in political events in Iraq.

HUNTER